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AUTHOR Lamb, Catherine E.
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ABSTRACT

If "logic" is defined as a means to create good reasons for accepting clear and unambiguous conclusions, then feminist instructors of composition should use it not only to dismantle traditional male notions of combative discussion, but also to build their own paradigms based on an acceptance of difference. Those feminists such as Sally Gearhart, Joyce Trebilcot, or Andrea Nye who shun logic altogether, maintaining that "any intent to persuade is an act of violence," will often employ logic in their own arguments; furthermore, they are not above attack in their own right. If those in feminist composition are to move ahead in engaging difference for the ultimate goal of an enriched concept of community, they must look at the tools available to them in ways that are not deterministic. They need also to recognize and draw on what is shared with the work of others such as Kenneth Burke. Janice Moulton, among others, has looked for alternatives to the adversarial method in philosophical argument, suggesting that reasoning be used in the context of larger systems of ideas and that experience be allowed as a necessary element of some reasoning processes. An introduction to women's studies class at Albion College used discussion to employ logic in such a manner as to work through differences while still respecting them. When in one class meeting a student indicated that she thought homosexuality was an "abomination," a productive discussion ensued. (Contains 17 references.) (TB)

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Catherine E. Lamb

Albion College

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Logic and Feminist Argument: Yet Again, Can the Master's Tools Dismantle the Master's House?

Logic, as I am using the term here, is a means to create good reasons for accepting conclusions: premises that are clear and unambiguous, supported by evidence that is relevant, varied, and sufficient. Traditionally, philosophers and rhetoricians have thought of logic as a neutral tool, its existence separate from its use. Feminists discussing logic and argumentation have expressed two types of attitudes toward this distinction: some (Gearhart, Nye, and Trebilcot) want to collapse the distinction between the two as well as re-focus the terms of the discussion. What matters is not logic itself but who is using the logic and for what ends. Their answer to Audre Lorde's question in the title of my talk is an unambiguous "No." Others (Frey, Jarrett, Lamb, Moulton) are sensitive to the first group's critique of what has been called masculinist argument--combative argument, in which the goal is to win--but see the source of the problem in the ends, not the means, i.e., not the tools. Today, I want to argue that these master's tools are key to our achieving both the goals Lorde sets forth in her speech and the goals of feminist composition--approaches to the teaching and practice of writing that draw on women's experience and theorizing about it for goals, pedagogy, and forms of discourse.

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Let's look at the context in which Lorde made her comments. She spoke as a member of a panel on "The Personal and the Political" at the Second Sex Conference in October of 1979. As she says, it was the only panel where black feminists and lesbians were represented. The white feminists who organized the conference were there, she felt, assuming that the master's tools could be used to dismantle the master's house. "Tools" for her means the differing perspectives that a lesbian or black feminist might, for example, bring to a discussion of nurturing. White heterosexual feminists might be likely to assume "under a patriarchal structure that maternity is the only social power open to women" (99). Lesbians and black feminists might be more likely to see the concept of nurturing in much broader terms--that the only true way to the interdependence that nurturing implies is to celebrate differences among women: "difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (99).

As I have come to understand feminism over the years, one of its key goals is that which Lorde identifies--the conditions under which difference can be identified and worked with, for the purpose, ultimately, of creating community that wouldn't be possible except for that honoring of difference. It is striking to me that recent composition theorists who are not specifically feminist argue for the goal of discourse in almost identical terms. Take, for example, Gregory Clark's article, "Rescuing the Discourse of Community," in the most recent CCC, in which he points out that composition theorists have assumed that agreement is necessary for cooperation. Such an assumption, in "overlook[ing], minimiz[ing], or exclud[ing] difference" (61) does exactly what Lorde was

being critical of in her speech. Clark argues for the necessity of difference, for its valuing, if one is to have cooperation among equals (62-3). Surely a primary goal for feminist composition theorists should be that they bring to bear what they have learned from theorizing women's experience to the difficult but essential practice of honoring difference.

The feminist theorists in the first group would want to claim that they too have this goal. Gearhart and Trebilcot, however, do so, in a way that strikes me as not very productive: there is no sense of how one can go beyond an acknowledging of difference, of how one can use difference for anything. Gearhart states quite simply that "any intent to persuade is an act of violence" (195). She acknowledges that change occurs all the time, but what she objects to is someone's intent to change someone else; change should only occur if there is an internal basis for it. Trebilcot makes essentially the same points in her three principles: "I speak only for myself; I do not try to get other wimmin to accept my beliefs in place of their own; there is no 'given'" (1). Trebilcot's principles can realistically be used, she says, only in "situations that are predominately wimmin-identified" (3).

The case of Andrea Nye is more complicated because she takes on the entire history of logic. She begins by noting that all the logicians of history have been men, who have tried to show how Truth can be arrived at, regardless of who speaks it or under what conditions. She wishes instead to illuminate the social and historical contexts in which logic has been developed. A basic assumption for Nye is that "all human communication, including logic, is motivated" (175). Her alternative to logic is

"responding." "Responding" as she advocates it cultivates the skills of reading: "attention, listening, understanding, responding" (183)--surely the types of skills that honor difference. Yet responding for her can also sound much like an ad hominem attack: She says it might "refashion the words of those in power into a serpent whose bite is exposure, . . . the exposure that shows all men to be mothers' sons dependent on others" (176). Nothing would shut down an attempt to work with difference more quickly than attempts to expose readers for what they are from the writer's perspective. There is also the inescapable fact that Nye (like Gearhart and Trebilcot) uses logic in constructing her critique, and that the skills of responding also require the exercise of logic. These critiques span more than twenty years of feminist thought; while I will continue to listen to anyone who makes similar points in the future, I don't see what there is to be gained for theorists of feminist composition by continuing to return to the topic.

In short, these three critiques of using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house don't stand up very well to any prolonged examination. They are inconsistent with the practices the writers themselves follow, they are extremely idealistic (Gearhart) or narrow in their application (Trebilcot); most fundamentally, while they allow us to acknowledge difference, they don't tell us what to do with it, and, in the case of Nye, some types of responding may actually discourage expressions of difference. Approaches such as theirs, Thomas Farrell says, in Norms of Rhetorical Culture, "misunderstand" rhetoric if they "assume that it begins and ends as merely directive or manipulative discourse" (238).

If we in feminist composition are to move ahead in engaging difference for the ultimate goal of an enriched concept of community, we must look at the tools available to us in ways that are not deterministic. We need also to recognize and draw on what we share with the work of others such as Kenneth Burke and his many discussions of how both identification and division are part of the human condition, embodied in his wonderful image of the ongoing cocktail party, to which people come and go ("The Philosophy of Literary Form"); also Chaim Perelman's advocacy of "dialectical dialogue," in which the participants try to agree on what they believe to be true or, at least, "most secure" (165); and Habermas's insistence that all participants in discourse have an equal chance to speak, whether they are questioning or giving reasons (McCarthy xvii).

Feminist theorists probably emphasize more than these theorists do how the use of these tools is particularized: the ends toward which they are used and the contexts that accompany their use--in the case of logic, a recognition that it alone, pace Habermas, will not suffice in our treatment of difference. If logic is not accompanied by trust and openness, it's unlikely that it will even be used for these ends. The tool of logic requires as well that its user be aware of its relationship to power and authority. The authority that is appropriate here is what I called in a paper at last year's 4C's, organic authority. Someone exercising this kind of authority recognizes she possesses nothing that can be used unilaterally. Her authority always only exists in context. In fact, it only has meaning in relationship to someone else and the ends of a particular situation. An organic expression of authority may thus be inherently dialogical. Premises can be formed in conversation; one makes a space for the other party's views,

even at the expense of modifying one's own. Finally, authority expressed this way is made visible: we see the basis on which claims are made; we are also aware of how they evolve. Thus, giving good reasons need not be an exercise of power in an autonomous, unilateral way ("Expressions of Authority").

The second group of feminist theorists I referred to at the beginning of the paper illustrates in various ways what I have been talking about here. The tools can be used both to tear down the master's house or to build a new one. In "Beyond Literary Darwinism: Women's Voices and Critical Discourse," Olivia Frey uses antagonistic argument to demonstrate the prevalence of this type of argument in contemporary literary critical writing. As she says, she is using the techniques because that is the only way she thinks she will be heard. Janice Moulton is looking for alternatives to the adversarial method in philosophical argument. She points out, for example, that the Socratic method is usually identified with adversarial reasoning, but that the goals are different: its goals are not to show that someone is wrong but to "shake people up about their cherished convictions so they can begin philosophical inquiries with a more open mind" (156). She sees Socrates as a "playful, helpful teacher" in the dialogues, not an "ironic and insincere debater" (157). Moulton advocates two alternatives to adversarial argument that sound much like more recent emphases on context: 1) relating the reasoning being used to a larger system of ideas; 2) accepting experience as a necessary element in certain reasoning processes: e.g., "it's valuable to believe in a Supreme Being if you're young, old, poor, or helpless, but may be less so if you feel in control."

The last two in this group of theorists begin by emphasizing the importance of

difference and therefore the necessity of conflict and having effective ways to deal with it. Both Susan Jarrett and I have noted the relative absence of attention to conflict in feminist composition because of the attention to developing a personal voice. The emphasis on uncritically accepting what someone else says means that the writer's relationship to readers is thought of as unproblematic. Jarrett, much like Moulton, puts her emphasis on context: if students' personal experiences can be located in "historical and social contexts," students will have a broader, more humane understanding of difference because they will understand how these contexts explain difference better than simply an appeal to individualism (121). Being able to conceptualize difference makes it more likely that one can then see how it might used as in, for example, establishing and maintaining community.

I have written both about adaptations of mediation and negotiation in a writing class as alternatives to argument and about how one might respond when agreement is not possible, when one has the tough job of living out all the lip service we pay to difference ("Beyond Argument" and "Other Voices, Different Parties"). In the former, the goal is not for either side to win but for both parties to find a solution in a fair way that is acceptable to both sides. Logic and argument are key to the process, especially at the beginning. Participants use it to be clear about their own positions before the negotiating or mediating begins. They also employ its tools--e.g., identifying fallacies, evaluating the strength of the link between premises and conclusion in an inductive argument--in preparing the writing which is the final outcome of the process. They really have built a different house. But sometimes the parties can't even agree on the plans for

the house or perhaps even that they want a house at all. In this case, it is no small task to keep the conversation going by drawing on Nye's skills of attention and listening, both of which would not be possible without logic. One can also choose, temporarily at least, to remove one's self from the immediate arena of the disagreement and reflect for others on the merits of the various viewpoints, thus creating a space in which others can modify their own viewpoints.

To close this paper, I want to illustrate logic as it might operate to honor difference and, in the long run, to build community--exactly the attention paid to difference that Audre Lorde believed in so passionately. This incident occurred in my Introduction to Women's Studies class earlier this semester. During the time that I have taught this class and others with a feminist orientation, I have wrestled with whether or not the class is really propaganda, not so thinly disguised. There's no point in teaching Introduction to Women's Studies, for example, if women and their concerns are not at the center of the course. In particular, I have asked myself what attitudes I want students to leave the course with. Just this semester, I had decided that I was comfortable with what for some feminists would seem to be copping out: I wanted students to be aware of how issues such as the socialization of girls, sexuality (including lesbianism), women's health, rape, and women and the workplace are treated from feminist perspectives. Whether or how these viewpoints were incorporated into students' own belief systems, while an interest of mine, was not something that could be necessarily achieved in a semester or even in five years. So the class itself needed to be not only the study of certain kinds of difference but the practice of it as well. How well

we would succeed in this area would have everything to do with whether or not we could truly function as a community.

Students in my classes always have the responsibility of leading class discussions. They meet with me ahead of time, but also have a lot of freedom in how they use the time. This particular day, fairly early in the semester, three students, all juniors--Chad, Gregg, and Stephanie--were leading a discussion on a selection from Letty Cottin Pogrebin's Growing Up Free: Raising Your Child in the 80's, dealing with our assumption that gender roles determine sexuality and our fear that if children don't grow up with a clear idea of their gender role, they will become homosexual. Chad and Gregg are good friends, but neither of them knew Stephanie before the class began. The discussion was going along well: the three leaders had good questions, to which the other students responded well; they had also done some outside reading so they could bring in additional perspectives. I was congratulating myself on the openminded class I had when Stephanie just stopped what she was saying and indicated she believed homosexuality was an "abomination". It was a choice, and the way to change someone's mind about having made this choice was through spirituality. If she had a gay or lesbian child, she would love that child but also make clear that homos uality was wrong and could be cured. Hands shot up all over the classroom, including mine. Gregg and Chad immediately took on the role of moderators, refraining from entering the debate themselves, even though I knew they both had strong opinions on the topic. Wisely, too, they did not call on me but allowed other students to establish the parameters of the discussion. Almost all the students disagreed with Stephanie but did so in a way that made clear they

respected her right to her opinion. One student differentiated between her right to her own views and his concern for the harm she might to do to any homosexual children she might have. Towards the end, Gregg pointed out people were working with differing assumptions about homosexuality--that either one was born with it or chose it--and that the assumption one began with would affect oth- spects of one's views on the issue. I didn't say a word--I didn't need to--until the end of the hour when I thanked everyone, pointing out that they had shown it really was possible to have a sustained discussion on a controversial topic in such a way that we remained a group. If anything, it may be that that day we <u>became</u> a group, our own small community. Since then, we have had any number of heated discussions; I know from reading students' journals that sometimes they feel silenced and sometimes they are appalled by what someone else says, but we have continued to talk, and I continue to look forward to the class.

This incident shows how critical logic is to the honoring of difference and the building of community. It is not a sufficient cause but a necessary one. I have no idea what any of these students will think about homosexuality by the end of the semester or in one year, but I am confident that they will all be clear about some of the major issues surrounding sexual orientation and carry with them a model for how one continues in conversation on topics that matter. We have a new house and know how to keep improving it.

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